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Please cite this publication as follows:

Merchant, P. (2017) Review of Colleen M. Conway, "Sex and slaughter in the tent of Jael: a cultural history of a biblical story," New York: Oxford UP, 2017. *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, 13 (2). ISSN 1556-7524.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue132/PDF/merchant.pdf>

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Can You Forgive Her?

Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael: A Cultural History of a Biblical Story. Colleen M. Conway. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Peter Merchant, Canterbury Christ Church University

The book of Judges has, in ‘the tent of Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite,’ a crime scene beside which the first-floor apartment at The Herons might pale into insipidity. In Jael herself it boasts a figure of mystery and maybe of menace by conjuring whom Hardy’s contemporaries could ‘ask the woman question,’ as Colleen M. Conway’s absorbing study has Lord de Tabley¹ doing (93), with a real vengeance. Each successive phase of the cultural history reconstructed here, however, has seen questions about this extraordinarily enigmatic biblical story proliferate, and conjecture about both its ethical base and its plot thicken. Adam Clarke’s early nineteenth-century Scripture commentary identified nine grounds on which what was done to Sisera in Jael’s tent, even though it sealed a glorious victory for the children of Israel, had to be considered ‘exceedingly questionable.’²

Among the story’s modern interrogators is A. S. Byatt, in a story of her own entitled ‘Jael’³ which — as Conway puts it — ‘intersects in complex ways with the Jael and Sisera tradition’ (160). Byatt registers what is ‘peculiarly disagreeable and morally equivocal’ about the biblical source: the speed and seeming nonchalance with which it moves from the defeat in battle of Israel’s mighty oppressor through the offer of hospitality made to him afterwards by the supposedly neutral Jael to the shock of Jael then suddenly offering violence instead when she hammers a tent-peg into his temples. It does not stop to settle the doubts that it raises along the way. Rather, as Conway observes (41), it leaves the reader wondering about ‘Jael’s

problematic ethnic affiliation' and wondering in addition not only 'did Jael and Sisera have sex or not?' but whether, if so, it was forced or consensual. Jael's reasons first for welcoming Sisera and then for killing him remain unclear. Most subsequent versions of the story emerge from Conway's analysis as abhorring this psychological vacuum and therefore as hastening to equip Jael with the 'inner life and motivations' which the Bible denies her (23). The lacunae in the biblical original encourage the construction of backstories and of other tributary narratives (particularly concerning Heber) which flow now this way and now that.

The result is the exacerbation of contradictions already present at source. As 'Judges 4 and 5 depict Jael as both praiseworthy and deadly' (66), so the many reinscriptions and transformations of the story include some that celebrate and others that vilify. At Bunyan's *Palace Beautiful*, 'the Hammer and Nail with which *Jael* slew *Sisera*'⁴ are among 'the Engines with which some of [the Lord's] Servants had done wonderful things.' This view coexists with others, however, which are directly at odds with the position taken up in *The Pilgrim's Progress*; and, 'when Jael becomes a treacherous and evil woman, Sisera is redeemed' (57). A further swing of the pendulum, ensuring that for every negative there is an equal and opposite positive, leads to Jael being portrayed elsewhere as a victim of treachery and evil, and the killing as 'a justified retribution' (143). The Jael who is a snake in the grass, false to all that hospitality enjoins and all that womanhood entails, appears impossible to reconcile with the Jael who — in taking up arms on behalf of the Israelites, or in striking back against male power, or in allegorically crushing the head of the serpent — makes herself 'a champion of the oppressed and slayer of evil' (46).

Sex and Slaughter in the Tent of Jael presents these polarities with a fine attention to detail which at the same time always has its eye on the bigger picture. The story of Jael and Sisera stands revealed as a site of continual contestation, accommodating one kind of division and inviting another. For not only has the story been used to disrupt 'conventional gender

binaries,' all the way back from Joanna Russ (132) to the art of the Renaissance (61), but the battle of the sexes which has often been discerned *within* the story is mirrored by a battle of the sexes *over* the story. 'Perhaps not surprisingly,' Conway finds, 'the more positive assessments of Jael typically come from representations of Jael by female authors and artists.' (26)

No less approximate than the distinctions drawn as to gender, but also — at least for the purposes of an *NCGS* review — no less pertinent, are the distinctions drawn as to period. It is in fact in connection with the literature of the 'long' nineteenth century that Conway can most credibly hypothesize a pattern which has 'female authors generally turn[ing] to the tradition with a more sympathetic view toward Jael's violence, while male authors typically condemn it' (166). A more sustained discussion both of the works of this period which that cap fits and of the exceptions to the rule would certainly bring rich pickings. Conway's remit is to hint at what these might be and to facilitate the necessary investigations, not conduct them herself, since her study cannot scrutinize everything and seeks to be 'representational' rather than 'comprehensive' (8, 166).

It certainly intrigues and tantalizes with its avowedly selective consideration of the period of most concern to readers of *NCGS*. Its scrutiny of Florence Kiper Frank's poetic drama *Jael*, staged in Chicago in 1914, whets the appetite for several other plays about Jael which are listed in *Dramatic Compositions Copyrighted in the United States 1870 to 1916*. Its suggestion that a major function of the Jael and Sisera tradition in the nineteenth century is 'bringing the issue of women's oppression to the fore' (93) not only makes the poem which Lord de Tabley contributed to the tradition in 1873 more interesting than it was ever previously thought to be but sparks speculation about the 1870s and the story's apparent transformation (as, in 1872, at the hands of Alfred Ford) into 'A Woman's Rights Drama.' More might perhaps have been done to represent the nineteenth-century interpretive tradition: the commentaries, dictionaries and encyclopedias through which Mary Wilson Carpenter has shown that much Victorian

reading of the Bible was mediated;⁵ the biographies of women featured in Joshua and Judges which were recently sifted by Marion Ann Taylor and Christiana de Groot.⁶ The forty-odd pages that Taylor and de Groot devote to Jael feature twelve writers of whom only one is included by Conway and only two find their way into the work of 2005 to which Conway's reader is referred for 'a good overview' of this material (177n42).

One reason why allusions to Jael, and retellings of her story, abounded in the nineteenth century is that the Victorians were greatly given to catching their own reflections in the mirrors of myth and history, and very well used to having novels such as Kingsley's *Hypatia* show them their own likenesses 'in toga and tunic, instead of coat and bonnet.'⁷ (The same cultural climate affects the appropriation of figures like Medea, for example, and of Jael's closest spiritual sister, the Apocryphal Judith.) Another reason is simply that, in whatever period, the story ideally lends itself to co-option into those 'cultural conversations about gender, sex, and violence' (9) which Conway is able to trace through the vicissitudes of the Jael and Sisera tradition. Since on its own it is matter too soft to bear a lasting mark, the story can take on whatever shape is determined by the drift of the particular conversation that has pressed it into service. Each age finds in it fresh ways of negotiating issues which are topical and troubling, and in each age it is newly saturated with the *Zeitgeist*. Recognizing this, Conway's study does full justice to the rich and varied shading that has been applied across the centuries to the blank canvas of Jael's tent.

¹ John Leicester Warren [afterwards Lord de Tabley], 'Jael,' in *Searching the Net: A Book of Verses* (London: Strahan and Co., 1873), 112–27.

² *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, with a Commentary and Critical Notes by Adam Clarke*, vol. 2 (New York: Emory and Waugh, 1831), 22.

³ A. S. Byatt, 'Jael,' in *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1998), 195–216.

⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. W. R. Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 54.

⁵ Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Imperial Bibles, Domestic Bodies: Women, Sexualities and Religion in the Victorian Market* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003).

⁶ Marion Ann Taylor and Christiana de Groot (eds.), *Women of War, Women of Woe: Joshua and Judges through the Eyes of Nineteenth-Century Female Biblical Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016).

⁷ Charles Kingsley, *Hypatia: or, New Foes with an Old Face*, 2 vols (London: John W. Parker, 1853), 2: 377.